

Best Practices in Referee Development

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Background

- National Referee Coach, US Soccer
- State Director of Referee Instruction, Illinois
- Member, Referee Advisory Committee, Midwest Region, US Youth Soccer
- Assessor for PRO Development Group
- Former FIFA and MLS Referee



Short Term vs Long Term

- Short term--these practices are best followed in a tournament setting, with a limited number of games and referees
- Long term—these are practices to follow over the course of a season or more
- In either case, there must be a connection between the assigning of referees and the observation/evaluation/coaching of the officials



Short term case study

- Examples from Midwest Region as practiced by Chairs Chico Villarruel (2017-) & Jonathan Meersman (2010-2016)



Other Staff

- Tony Crush—assistant referee administrator
- Margaret Domka—mentor coordinator
- Rich Grady—mentor coordinator
- Dan Lusicic—site coordinator
- Brian Miller—assistant referee administrator
- Instructors and Ref-Coaches assigned by US Soccer



Initial Game Assignments

- Assigning follows a clear protocol for the initial phase of games (round robin play)
- Factors based on
 - Referee grade
 - Experience at regional events
 - Ranking from state associations



Assigning Protocol

- 3 days of round robin play
- Referees with higher ranking/grade/experience normally scheduled for 2 days of middle/4th
- Lower end of the spectrum gets 2 days of ARs and 1 day of middle/4th



Advantages

- There is a clear pathway and protocol that all officials are told about
- No surprises or accusations of politics
- System is transparent



Role of Assessing

- Each game is observed by a ref coach/mentor
- Every official gets feedback on every performance
- There are also roving staff members who rotate around the complex and watch parts of games
- Feedback to staff compiled throughout the day using technology (google forms)



Instruction

- During round robin phase, referees split into small groups of 15-20
- Each group is led by an assessor/mentor
- Idea is to get group participation and give feedback in a small setting
- Field work incorporated on the rest day for teams prior to semis



Increasing Capacity of Ref Coaches

- Goal for 2018—have National Ref Coaches available to conduct shadow assessments for State assessors looking to become Nationals
- This will hopefully make the event more attractive to assessors
- National coaches will pass on best practices from their level



Adjusting Assignments

- Officials who have distinguished themselves will have their assignments adjusted upward
- Those who have struggled will have theirs adjusted downward
- All adjustments are performance based
- Officials can rise rapidly in the tournament hierarchy beyond the limitations initially imposed by the assigning policy



Selection for Semis and Finals

- Transparency and accountability are key
- Entire referee staff participates
- Reps from 2 state associations invited as non-speaking observers
- All available officials posted on wall by grade
- All relevant data points considered
 - Assessments
 - Personal observations by staff



Selection to National Championships

- Same process followed as outlined above
- Additional advantage of fewer games being played at one time gives opportunity for multiple sets of eyes on each game
- State that an official is from is never a consideration for why that person is picked



Positives of this approach

- Merit based
- Tries to exclude factors other than performance
- Ref coaches and mentors feel that their input is desired and valued—ref coaches without a specific assignment for semis will also rove and give feedback on all officials they observe
- Referees feel that the system is fair and that everyone has a chance



Challenges of this model

- Requires a high degree of teamwork and trust
- Requires enough ref coaches and mentors to cover every game
- Competing with other events for National Ref Coaches
- Need both quantity and quality of ref coaches to make this work well



Longer Term Referee Case Study

- Example is taken from Illinois
- Support of State Referee Committee is vital
- Bob Balciunas, SRA
- Tim Deters, SYRA
- Abbey Okulaja, SDA
- Rich Grady, SDI
- Gus Bender, IYSA Pres.
- Claudio Frigo, ISSA Pres.



The Illinois Example

- SDA, SDI, and SYRA are all National Ref Coaches for US Soccer
- As such, all are exposed to latest concepts in referee instruction and development put forward by US Soccer
- SDA and SDI are assessors for PRO Development Group
- Focus on creating opportunities for advancement and education
- Long term goal—get our officials into the professional leagues



Adult Mentoring Program

- Administered by Abbey Okulaja
- Currently has 34 participants
- Participants identified by the Referee Committee in a collaborative process
- Officials range from grade 8 to grade 3
- All participants commit to attending training and doing required homework



Resources for Program

- 10 mentors who informally observe games
- This group includes 5 current or former National Referees
- Instructional Resources (in addition to Ref Committee Members)
 - Peter Balciunas (current PRO)
 - Eric Boria (former FIFA AR, current PRO)
 - Michael Kennedy (PRO)



Program Structure

- Group meets twice a month from January through November
- Each training incorporates
 - Fitness
 - Field work
 - Classroom session run by Okulaja, with assistance from Grady, Deters, and others, focusing on FIFA Futuro clip method



Use of video

- Officials now expected to use their own games as source of analysis
- Have to get copies of games to analyze
- Refs expected to show clips to the group
- Refs also expected to analyze their performances in writing to head of group

End of Year

- Each official gets feedback on their progress
- Committee evaluates whether or not to keep individuals as part of the group
- Committee considers inviting new members
- Members can be removed for performance or for not meeting attendance commitments



Coordination

- Okulaja is local assignor for US Soccer responsible for PDL, NPSL, and Open Cup assignments in addition to DA games
- Tiers of referees created for assignment purposes by position (ref/AR) and age of game
- Academy matches at U18 level all assessed at no expense to referees
- Focus on National and State level ref coaches
- Other assessments as requested
- Cooperation with local assignors of adult leagues



What do referees need to progress?

- Appropriately challenging games from a variety of levels and sources
- Referees cannot expect to progress by focusing only on
 - Youth
 - Adult
 - Entry Level Pro



Youth Structure

- Advantages of high level youth competition
 - Organization
 - Quality fields
 - Can challenge fitness
- Disadvantages of high level youth competition
 - Environment is too well organized
 - Hard to work on player management



Adult Competition

- Advantages
 - Present challenges for player management and game control
 - Exposure to multiple styles of play and ethnic backgrounds
- Disadvantages
 - Not as organized
 - Fields can be less than ideal



Entry Level Pro

- Advantages
 - Introduction to pro game expectations
 - Learn to manage players in this environment
 - Different level from local leagues
- Disadvantages
 - Level of professionalism can vary widely from place to place
 - Season occurs in short window
 - Not that many chances to go around



Referee Development

- Cannot rely on exclusively on any one level of games to help the referee advance
- Cooperation between assignors is vital
- Must be consistent monitoring and feedback



Youth Mentoring Program

- Run by Deters (SYRA)
- Designed for officials under 18
- Most meetings to provide training are virtual
- Hard to do in person meetings for minors traveling long distances
- Occasional in person meetings on weekend
- Coordination between SYRA and assignor for State Cup and President's Cup
- Consideration for selection to regional events



Additional Factors

- State Presidents Gus Bender (Youth) and Claudio Frigo (Adult) provide budget to fund both mentoring programs
- Funding support for referees to travel to important competitions out of state
 - Academy Showcases
 - Disney Cup
 - Youth Regional events
 - Adult Regional events



Does this work?

- Numerous officials from both programs have progressed to the National Referee level and gotten assignments in professional leagues
- MLS/NWSL
- USL
- NASL

